



EFFICACY OF TRADITIONAL MARKETING STRATEGY OF BELL METAL HANDICRAFT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT Bell metal handicraft is one of the oldest and important handicrafts of Assam. This handicraft has historical importance. Traditionally, different kinds of utensils and items have been made in the handicraft. Most of the utensils and items are socially and culturally attached with the Assamese people. The workers use traditional tools and techniques. This handicraft is associated with the culture of other States of the country. Some products have international demand. We cannot think about the Buddhist religious ritual without the use of some products which are made only in Assam. The marketing strategy of this handicraft is interesting. Though the strategy is traditional, it is found successful. This may be a model for other handicraft industries of the country.

KEYWORDS : bell metal, *bhutiya taal*, traditional, utensils

1. Introduction:

India is famous for its handicrafts from the ancient times. She has about three million handicrafts artisans out of which most of the artisans are engaged in metal works. These metal artisans exhibit intrinsic creativity with their majestic work and play an important role in carrying the traditional art and culture of the land (Tiwari, 2002).

The handicraft sector plays an important role in Assam economy. This land is famous for handloom and textile, metal craft viz. bell metal and brass metal, ivory industry, bamboo and cane products, woodcraft, masks, pottery, terracotta, toys, traditional paintings, jewelry etc. The importance of bell metal handicraft in Assam economy is as like as handloom and textile. However, from socio-cultural point of view, the contribution of bell metal handicraft products is the most.

The working of bell metal handicraft was mostly done in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and China. However, at present the handicraft is found only at Sarthebari of Assam and at Bankura of West Bengal of India. Product diversity of Bankura of West Bengal is limited compared to that of Sarthebari of Assam. Bankura produces only singing bowls. But the handicraft of Sarthebari produces all kinds of utensils which have very high socio-cultural and religious value.

It is not known about the genesis of the bell metal handicraft of Assam. This practice has been done at Sarthebari from time immemorial. It is believed that bell metal handicraft was started during the Muryuran period i.e. 312-185 BC (Mishra and Sultana, 2015) However, a written document reveal that Kumar BhaskarBarma, the King of Kamrup (the origin name of Assam) of 7th Century, gifted some bell metal utensils to the then King of Kannauj, Harshavardhana.

Whereas, handicraft industry all over India has been struggling for survival, there is no any immediate threat found in case of this handicraft. The production of this handicraft has been increasing, exports of some items has been rising. The handicraft has been providing considerable income to the artisans without any government support. In such a situation, it is important to search what kind of product diversity is found in the handicraft which makes this handicraft possible to survive? Whether the present marketing strategy is working well to get sufficient demand for the product? Is there any opportunity to explore new market for the handicraft product? The study has been done following these research questions.

The respondents with different background gave the different views. At the end of the session, the group gave some unanimous findings.

2. Literature review:

Number of studies have been found in the literature. Most of them are similar works. However the important studies are narrated here.

Tiwari (2002) did a diagnostic study of the artisans of bell metal handicraft of Chattisgarh. He studied about the bell metal handicraft in detail from raw material to production process. He focused about the issues facing the bell metal handicrafts and did a SWOT analysis. Besides, Tiwari suggested some action plans for the betterment of the

handicraft. Marjit and Dibyendu (2005) undertook a study on different formal and informal sectors including bell metal. They focused on production stage, organizational change, marketing channels of different informal sectors including bell metal handicrafts. Dash (2005) on behalf of Ministry of Small Scale Industries, Government of India, did a thorough study on the bell metal handicraft of Orissa. The study focused the history, cluster map, value chain analysis and business operation. He also did the SWOT analysis of the handicraft. In an another study, Tiwari (2015) focused his study on Dhokra Art on bell metal undertaken in Chhattisgarh. In his study, Tiwari explained the process of Dhokra Art.

Kumar (2011), did a cluster study on bell metal handicraft of Sarthebari. A thorough study was undertaken which included raw material, process, tools and equipment, product range, design audit, and value chain analysis. The study shows how the traditional tools and techniques can be replaced with the modern and sophisticated tools and technique. While Choudhury (2012) tried to develop a logistic model for the unorganized sectors of North East India, he identified different kind of traditional products which were made in bell metal handicraft in Assam. Roy (2014) undertook his study on bell metal handicraft of Sarthebari by focusing the entrepreneurship evolution of the handicraft and found out the problems associated with the handicraft. Sahay (2015) did a comparative study between the Assam's bell metal handicraft and Moradabad's bell metal industry. He emphasized on the use of modern tools and techniques to develop the bell metal handicraft of Assam.

Sarma (1978), Choudhury (1995), Deka (1995), Deka (2010), Mishra and Sultana (2015), Kalita and Prosad (2016) have conveyed same line of thought and all these scholars concerned about the problems faced by the bell metal handicraft. They also suggested some measures to save the handicraft.

Thus it is depicted that the existing literature can be categorized into two parts. One part studied about the bell metal handicrafts found in the other states of India excluding Assam. The other part focused about the bell metal handicraft of Assam. It is seen that both the categories have highlighted the different problems faced by the handicraft. It is believed that the globalization has destroyed the handicraft creating different substitute commodities with low price. No studies have been found which showed about success stories of the handicraft even in the rampant spread of globalization. The present study has filled this research gap by focusing how traditional marketing strategy has successfully strengthened the bell metal handicraft.

3. Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To narrate the diversity of products of bell metal handicraft produced in Assam.
2. To narrate the existing product delivery marketing strategies of the handicraft
3. To identify the potential markets for bell metal products of Assam

4. Study area:

Sarthebari is a semi urban area under Barpeta District of Assam. It is

situated in 26.35 North and 91.220 East. The town is historically important. The place is a witness of famous 'Krishak Vidroh' during the British rule. The movement was known as 'Raj Mel'.

The town is popularly known as bell metal town as the bell metal cluster of Assam is localized in this area only. Besides, the place is famous for *Xarai* industry of brass metal. This is the only place of Assam where *Xarai* is made in commercial purpose. The *Xarai* has heavy demand within the state. The place is distant 75 km (Approximately) from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. The population of the Town is around 10,000 according to the 2011 population census. However most of the people are engaged either in bell metal craft or farming.

5. Methodology:

The study is basically based on primary data. For collecting primary data, the investigator visited the bell metal town, Sarthebari many times. For fulfilling the first and second objective, the investigator visited the head office of Assam Cooperative Bell Metal Utensils Manufacturing Society Limited (ACBMUMSL) which is situated at Sarthebari. The bell metal artisans are the member of this cooperative society and this cooperative society is dedicated for the well being of the artisans. Majority of the artisans supply their products to this Cooperative society. There are total 12 retail outlets of ACBMUMSL all over the state. In all the 12 retail outlets same products are sold. The ACBMUMSL supplies all raw materials to the artisans and the artisans supply the finished products to the society. The artisans are paid wage for this which vary on the basis of kinds of the utensils and its quality.

The investigator also took interview of the president and the secretary of Assam *Konhar Silpi Sangha*. All the artisans of bell metal handicraft are the member of this organization. This organization works for the well being of the artisans. This organization fixes the wage rate of bell metal works discussing with the ACBMUMSL.

Interviews were also taken from the retail outlets situated at Sarthebari, regarding the diversity of the product, demand pattern, quantity sold per year, earnings, source of raw materials, final consumer etc. Besides, there are some *Arabdari* at Sarthebari. *Arabdari* are those, who act as the intermediaries between the artisans and the retail outlets situated outside Sarthebari. *Arabdari* have a very important role in the supply chain.

The data collection tool was an interview schedule. Most of the questions were open-ended so that the respondents can get more opportunities to give his best views. In case of exporters and *Arabdari*, interview was taken from the population. Respondents were identified by taking the references as like as the technique of snow ball sampling. In case of retail outlets situated in the study area, the investigator did census survey. The investigator intentionally excludes the retail outlets situated in the other parts of the state outside Sarthebari since *Arabdari* are the main supply chain to those outlets and *Arabdari* were already interviewed.

As per as the third objective is concerned, the investigator arrange a focus group discussion. The group comprised all the five exporters of *Bhutiya taal*, the President of the Assam *Konhar Silpi Shangha* (AKSS) and the Manager of the Sarthebari Head Branch, ACBMUMSL.

It is important to know about the demand pattern of consumer before exploring new markets. It is not possible to identify the potential customer of the bell metal handicraft item. Besides, only a few tourists come to Sarthebari and those who come purchase the existing products. Since, the exporters have the experience of exporting in foreign market, and have got the opportunities to understand the demand pattern of the foreign customers, therefore, all the five exporters have been chosen for the group discussion. The president of the AKSL has the in-depth knowledge about the skills of the bell metal artisans since he himself is a skilled artisan. Accordingly, the manager of ACBMUMSL is selected because he gets the opportunities to meet the tourists since the tourists of bell metal visit the ABMUMSL and interact with him. The investigator provides them some unstructured questions like, what is the whether there is any making process of bell metal products at Sarthebari?, what are the basic raw materials of the handicraft?, what kind of utensils are made in the handicraft at present?, whether there is any potentiality to increase the demand for

Bhutiya taal? How is the demand of singing bowl in the international market? Is there any demand of other products made of bell metal in the foreign market? Is there any potential danger for the handicraft? Is there any availability of raw materials for the handicrafts? What kind of product adaptation should be made?

6. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Adaptation of the bell metal handicraft products:

Traditionally, the bell metal craftsmen produced different bell metal utensils as their hobby, not as a profession. People are rich in agricultural activities and took bell metal handicraft as a seasonal work. The craftsmen gave importance to make aesthetic products. Products itself indicated the artistic skill of the artisans. Besides, the craftsmen produced those utensils which were used in day to day activities. The list of traditional products is shown in the column number 1 of the table 1.

Different types of bell metal utensils made in Assam had been used in different socio-cultural, religious, racial and traditional occasions as well as in day to day life of Assamese people.

Bata has been used to offer areca nuts to the guest, *Bhojan Dakshina* to Brahmin, *Xarai* to God, *Gamosa* on it to the guest, *Prasad* to the God etc. *Baan bati* is used to take tea and curry. *Kalah* was originally used to keep water at home. Some used *Kalah* to carry drinking water from pond or well. *Temi* was used to offer *Chun* (white limestone paste) that is taken with areca nut and *Paan*. *Gilas* has been used to take drinking water, tea, milk etc.

Categories	Types of the products
a) Oriinal product	Daflakahi, Ban kahi/maihang, Sarachkahi, Jelkahi, Daflabati, Such bati, Jelbati, Charas ban bati, Plain ban bati, Gilash, Ban-gilas, Nagphetibata, Charasbata, Bajaaurabata, Joribata, Bhortaal, Khutitaal, Ojapalitaal, Bhutiyataal, Kalah, Temi, Kharahi
b) Present demand pattern in home market	Sarachkahi, Jelkahi, Such bati, Jelbati, Ban bati, Charasbata, Bajaaurabata, Bhortaal, Khutitaal, Tray, Wall hanging, Statue of Gods & Goddesses, Table clocks, Engraving
c) Present demand pattern Outside the state	Daflakahi, Daflabati, Bhutiyataal
d) Demand in International Market	Bhutiyataal, Singing bowls
Source: Field survey	

The Assamese families take their meal in bell metal dishes, bowl, and glass made in the handicraft. It is believed that taking meal in bell metal utensils reduces chances of having stomach problem. It is customary in the Assamese society that guest are honoured by offering meal in the bell metal utensils. Every Assamese family keeps bell metal utensil at their homes as a status symbol. An Assamese guest feels honour when he has been provided meal in bell metal dishes and utensils. The Assamese aged people still take tea in *Banbati* (small bowl with stand) or *Bati* (bowl) made of bell metal. Bell metal craftsmen are so honoured in the Assamese society that the Assam Government gives *Silpi* pension (artist pension) to the bell metal artist. *Satriya Nritya* (One kind of classical dance started by Shankardeva), an important part of *Satriya* culture of Assam, cannot be performed without use of bell metal cymbal. The *Nam Prasanga* (shouting prayer and clapping hand with a specific rhythm), the backbone of *Satriya* culture of Assam, cannot be performed without using *Bhortaal* (cymbal of sized between 5 kg-14kg). *Ojapali*, a folk song with dance performed during the *Manasha Puja*, also uses *Ojapali taal* of bell metal. Even the *Shaktas* use different types of cymbals during *Arati*. *Thiyonaam*, *Nagara Naam*, *Boha Naam*, *Bhor-taal Nritya* all these folk performing arts need *Bhortaal* to perform. *Dafla Kahi* (gigantic dish) and *DaflaBaati* (gigantic bowl) used by *Dafla* Community of Arunachal Pradesh are made of Bell metal at Sarthebari of Assam. Every family of *Dafla* Community tries to keep *Daflakahi* and *Daflabati* as their racial identity.

The products of bell metal handicraft of Assam are of great use in

China, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, Sri Lanka, Tibet and other Buddhist Countries. In Buddhist religious chanting of prayer, three different kinds of cymbal known as *Pachang*, *Bheri*, and *Cimem* are used which are made only at Sarthebari of Assam. All these three types of cymbals are popularly known as *Bhutiya Taal* at Sarthebari. It is found in the literature that till 1970, these type of cymbals were produced in the Fujian Province, China. Mostly Taoist priest and Buddhist monk use this kind of musical instrument (Eng, 2011). In Assam, the *Bhutiya Taal* are being produced from time immemorial.

Singing Bowl are also made at Sarthebari which is used in meditation in Tibet, Japan, Australia, and USA as a healing therapy in different kinds of diseases like Cancer, Parkinson (Casanova, 2015; Bottom Line Health, 2011). Of course, singing bowl is made at Bankura of West Bengal too. But the size, shape and sound of that bowl is different. At Sarthebari, small sized singing bowl is produced.

The demand pattern has been changed in the last forty years. The hiked price of scrap bell metal, the main raw material of the handicraft, and the price of char coal have increased the price of bell metal utensils. Besides, the transformation of traditional culture to the modern adapted lifestyle of the society also has changed the demand pattern of the Assamese people. The use of utensils made of bell metal handicraft have been condensed from day to day use to only a few occasional use. People prefer to use these utensils only in marriage which is a part and parcel of Assamese society. The craftsmen are also becoming more professional rather than being occasional hobby worker. They emphasize more in quantity rather than quality. Though the metallic purity has not been changed, the craftsmen have compromised in case of design. Besides some traditional items, craftsmen have started to produce some modern items like wall hanging and engraved items.

In the recent years, the demand of *Dafla Kahi* and *Dafla Bati* has been increased among the *Dafla* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The *Dafla* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh feel pride to keep ancient *Dafla Kahi* and *Dafla Bati* with them. The more ancient items they have, more status in the society they get. The traders take the opportunity of this psychology of the *Dafla* Tribe. The traders purchase new items from the artisans, convert them into ancient like look by polishing and using chemical in it. The traders attend the weekly *Haat* held in the Arunachal Pradesh-Assam Border and in the Arunachal Pradesh.

Three kinds of cymbals viz. *Chimen*, *Bhery*, and *Pachangare* popularly known as *BhutiyaTaal* at Sarthebari of Assam. *Bhutiyataal* has also enormous demand among the Buddhist monks as these are the essential musical instruments of Buddhist religious songs. Most of the Buddhist monks are in Ladakh and Sikkim in India. Therefore, there are demand for *Bhutiya Taal* in Ladakh and Sikkim. The literature suggest that till 1970s, these kind of *taal* was produced in Tibet too. But, now a days, Sarthebari of Assam is the sole place which has been producing this Buddhist *Taal*. Therefore, Sarthebari has been meeting the demand of all Buddhist courtiers of the world. Therefore, the demand of *Bhutiya Taal* has been increasing day by day and the income of the artisans of these cymbals has also started to increase. The surprising thing is that though these cymbals are made at Sarthebari of Assam, these cymbals are not known as Assam's cymbals or Indian cymbals but known as Tibetan cymbals and sold as in the international market. Traders purchase new cymbals from Sarthebari, bring them into Nepal and Bhutan. Those are converted into ancient like looked cymbals by polishing them and using some particular chemicals. After packaging them, those are in the international market as ancient Chinese cymbals.

Singing bowl is another exportable item made of bell metal. Old bowls sized 300 grams to 500 grams are sold in the international market as singing bowl. The artisans donot produce as singing bowls but as a utensil. The traders collect old bowls from households by through some agents and sell them in the international market as singing bowls. Assamese people use bowls to keep curry, tea etc. As these become old after use of so many years, people prefer to exchange them for new one. The agents collect them and sell them to the traders. Of course, in the recent years, the trading of such old singing bowls are no more so profitable as equal as it was some years ago.

Product delivery strategies:

The marketing strategy specially the product delivery system is purely traditional in case of Bell metal utensils. The marketing of bell metal

utensils is interesting. The *Arobdari* plays an important role in marketing. *Arobdari* are those who supply scrap bell metal utensils and char coal, the main raw materials of the bell metal handicraft, to the artisans. The artisans produce different kinds of utensils according to the order of the *Arobdari*. Off course, the wage rate is different for different kinds of utensils. The *Arobdari* pay wages to the artisans per kilogram basis. The *Arobdari* do not sell the products directly to the consumer. They sell the products to different traders; they may be whole sellers or retailers.



Figure 1: Flow chart of product delivery marketing strategy of bell metal utensils

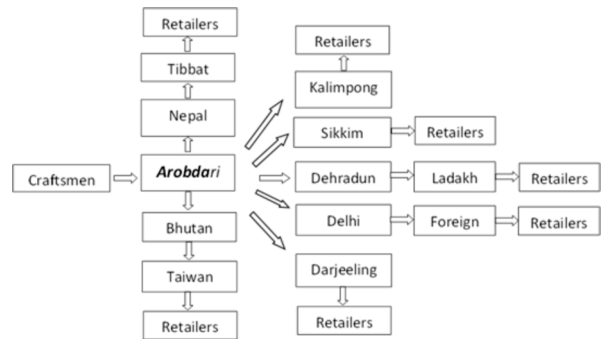


Figure 2: Flow chart of product delivery marketing strategy of Bhutiyataal (cymbal used by Buddhist)

The retail outlets of Sarthebari do not purchase bell metal products from the *Arobdari*. They have direct contact with the artisans. They also supply raw materials to the artisans and the artisans make the required products for wages per kilogram basis. The retail outlets doing the business at Sarthebari adopt this strategy to make their supply chain. But the retail outlets situated outside Sarthebari rely upon only on *Arobdari*. Of course, all the retail outlets situated at Sarthebari act as wholesaler because they also supply ready made products to the retail outlets which are doing business outside Sarthebari.

The demand of *Bhutiya taal* has been increased radically in the recent years in the international market. It is found in the literature that though some kind of *bhutiyataal* were produced in the Tibet, now a days, this kind of handicraft items are not produced there. This is Sarthebari of Assam which has been producing *Bhutiya taal* till today. There are 32 number of firms of bell metal in Assam which are solely producing *Bhutiya taal*. The entire *Bhutiya taal* which are used by the Buddhist monks are produced only by these 32 firms. These *Bhutiya taal* are collected by 5 *arabdari* and they supply to different channels for sending to the national as well as international markets. A flow chart has been depicted in the Figure 2 above which showed the supply chain of the *Bhutiya taal* in the national and international market. These 5 *arabdari* supply 50 tons of *Bhutiya taal* every year out of which more than 90 percent are supplied to the international market. The potentiality of the increment of the demand of *bhutiya taal* is more if proper marketing strategies will be adopted.

The supply chain of singing bowl is as like as the supply chain of *bhutiya taal*. Though till the last decade there were number of *arabdari* of singing bowl, presently one *arabdari* is there who supply singing bowl to Delhi from which it goes to the international market. However, the demand of singing bowl made at Sarthebari (Assam) has been declined, the frequency and the quantity of the exports of signing bowls has also reduced. Only one *arabdari* has been participated in the supply chain of singing bowl. Since the demand of the small singing bowls produced has been decreasing day by day, the *arabdari* has also reducing the supply amount

Identification of potential markets for bell metal products:

The traders of Sarthebari of Assam supply the items into West Bengal, Delhi within India and to Bhutan and Nepal outside India. We know that there are numbers of Buddhist countries in the world. Therefore, there are ample potentialities to increase the demand of *Bhutiyataal* in many Buddhist Countries.

Though singing bowls have been used in meditation and music therapy

in China since ancient times, the popularity of the singing bowls have been expanded to many Western countries. It is found that big sized singing bowls has also a demand for treating different kinds of diseases. Therefore, there is an opportunity to capture that market too.

It is believed that taking meal in bell metal dishes reduces the chances of stomach diseases (need reference). Of course extensive experiments are needed in this respect. However, this can be promoted in different countries.

As per as the domestic market is concerned, we can promote different decorative items viz. carving, souvenir items viz. small sized and handy utensils etc. This will increase the demand in different states in India.

1. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the recent decades, the demand for some traditional utensils made of bell metal has been reduced radically. In ancient times, Assamese people used different kinds of bell metal utensils in their day to day life. Those utensils are replaced for cheap aluminum and steel products. Therefore, we do not find some utensils like *kalah*, *mairhang*, *chundeni*, *goribata*, etc today in day to day life. Though some items are still produced, their uses are concentrated only in traditional occasions like marriage ceremony or any religious activities. However, some new items are introduced on the basis of demand. The mass production of *Bhutiya taal* is a result of product adaptation. Likewise, items like wall hanging, statues of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Table clocks, engraving are introduced as the demand of these products are increasing. It is found in the previous studies that the bell metal handicraft has been dying due to lack of demand. But, this study shows that the handicraft is not a dying position as per as the demand for *Bhutiya taal* is concerned. Fairly, the demand of the *Bhutiya taal* has been increased in the recent years since the Tibet has stopped to produce such type of cymbals.

Assam's bell metal handicraft produces small sized singing bowl. Though the demand for singing bowl of Assam has started to decline, it can be reversed if adaptation is made in case of singing bowls. West Bengal's bell metal handicraft has been exporting big sized singing bowls. Assam should also start to produce big sized singing bowls instead of small sized singing bowls. Since, treatment of disease through meditation with singing bowl has been becoming more popular in the western countries, the artisans of Assam's bell metal handicraft should concentrate to make big sized singing bowls.

Of course, some problems are found in the study. The basic problem is shortage of charcoal. Whereas, coal is used in Bankura of West Bengal, the artisans of Sarthebari of Assam use charcoal. There is acute shortage of this raw material. Therefore, the price of charcoal has been rising. The coal is economic compared to charcoal. But, the artisans do not want to use coal because, at Sarthebari, bell metal handicraft work is done in the own cottage of the head artisan. The coal is highly pollutant. Therefore, an alternative to charcoal should be identified and used.

Though number of studies have been undertaken on bell metal industry, most of the studies are concentrated on identification of the problems of the bell metal industry. The studies viewed that the handicraft is struggling for survival and would die if proper steps would not be undertaken by the government. The present study found the opposite result. The handicraft has started adaptation according to the demand and generating considerable amount of income. The products of bell metal handicrafts are supplied by the traditional *arabdari* system of product delivery technique which is found very successful. Of course the demand of this handicraft depend upon the existence of traditional singing bowl meditation system and Buddhist religious rituals. However, further research is needed to explore more market for *bhutiya taal* and singing bowls. More research is needed to explore new fuel as an alternative to charcoal. Where as the Bankura of West Bengal use tin and copper at the ratio 22:78 to make bell metal, the handicraft of Sarthebari uses scrap bell metal utensils as the main raw material. In such situation, more research is needed to identify which one more economic.

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